

On Love and Death

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For Dr. Rashmi Jyoti, who taught me that every story is worth telling, and for encouraging me to share mine.

Description

"On Love and Death" is a short story recounting the brief meetings of a personified Love and Death. The two meet on three occasions, from the beginning to the end of time. Without dialogue or biological classification, the story tells of life beyond the confines of humankind's perspective and implies a destructive evolutionary process by which the two suffer.

On Love and Death

There has only ever been Love and Death. They existed before time – before God wielded Love to create the Sun and before the Moon could pull the first tide. But with this Love, from which life itself would emerge, there needed balance; there needed Death.

Death was not born from love or compassion, and he was not born by the hand of God. Death emerged from the depths of the universe; a cosmic balance demanded by some great force that even Death himself could not understand. For millennia, these two beings wandered. They danced throughout the land, unaware of the presence of the other, yet Death followed Love like a quintessential shadow; he trailed her as she touched the world with golden fingertips, setting the first fire that would scorch the land, and he followed her as she beckoned the first rain, allowing it to flourish anew. They danced in naivety, knowing only who they were and unaware of who they might become and as the world moved on, so did they.

Love flittered between moments, the soft breeze of time washing over her naked figure in steady, pleading gusts. She often wandered dusk forests, basking in daylight as it filtered through thick evergreen canopies. The trees above would dance, slow and lazy, and the grass between her toes grew into long wisps, intimate against the softness of her thigh. The young and the old would curl beneath her feet, lidded eyes welcoming her attention as she passed on. There was nowhere that the young Love had not been, and there was nowhere that she was not welcome.

Unlike Love, Death wandered the empty silence of obscurity. He would creep from shadow to shadow, avoiding even the yielding moonlight, where the pallor of his bones would glow naked from beneath his translucent skin. The world did not shrivel as Death passed by, but rather, the air grew heavier, summoning endings and bidding farewells. Death would pause and murmur his apologies as he lulled the frightened into a forgiving, eternal rest. He was not cruel, and he was not unkind. Death was a nomad with stories of caution, yet still, he was feared.

Death would stumble across the stranger for the first time in the glade of such a forest, one thick with trees and ebbing voiceless winds, where young Love lay sprawled along the dank Earth. She sat balanced against the length of her extended arm, the curve of her spine weaving carefully between soft rolls of skin. Her long, flaxen hair rose and fell, lazy in an illusory breeze, revealing the swell of her breast beneath her other outstretched arm. Long fingers stroked the thin brown fur of a beast laid out before her; its long limbs lay twisted, awkward. Trees loomed above them, and Death paused with his hands pressed firmly against a thick trunk of rotten bark, and he watched.

Sunlight pooled in disarrayed beams, dripping down in golden rills from Love's sharp nose to her full, ruddy cheeks and velvet skin. Death watched the stranger's jaw jut out as she cocked her head to the right, and he followed her gaze to look out across a crooked path stark against a thick backdrop of greying trees and gnarled roots. Death questioned his company's interest - the trail was nothing more than a lightly treaded swoop of worn vegetation - until, from beneath an unearthed stalk, peaked two little paws, each no larger than Death's palm. Bright amber eyes flickered from beneath dense murk, followed by a timid face of dingy fur. Black whiskers stood out long past the pup's narrow face, and as he stuck out farther across the way, Death observed the frantic straining of its shoulders as they squirmed beneath the rootstock. A larger paw extended from above the small creature. The limb was frail, its bone firm beneath a mangy coat. As the pup's mother emerged fully, she dropped her head, gripping the scruff of the panicked whelp's neck, and with a firm tug and a shrill yelp, he tumbled forward. He bounced along the ground beneath his mother as she trotted side to side, his small body banging against her legs until, finally, he stopped. The pup was slow to stand, but eventually, he found his balance and rose, his ears brushing against the underside of his mother's belly. Timidity haunted the air as the pair turned; the pup stepped out alone. Death watched as they approached the carcass, slow at first but with quick curiosity. Their dry snouts, caked with blood and pus, inquired above the open flesh of a long and jagged incision in the beast's bloated middle.

Love's beckoning, the slow turning of her raised hand, caught Death's attention; her fingers pressed down on the cub's head until his muzzle was buried in the bloody tissue. Death watched as the youngling, and soon after his mother, tore violently into the decaying body. The stranger paused as the two succumbed to the ferocity of their famine. An ardent smile graced her lips, and she rose to her feet. With no notice of Death, Love clasped her hands across her middle and disappeared beyond the clearing's edge from whence the creatures had emerged.

The heavy stillness within Death, which crouched against his sternum in eager punishment, staggered and lost balance. He was obsessed. Feral, he would ravage the world, searching for her while he tore apart the ground and burnt down valleys. He drank rivers dry and flooded prairies. But he could not find her.

As time passed, Man having long since descended their careless evolutionary crusade, the two found themselves drawn to the same places. After many millennia of searching, Death could feel Love's rising nearness, and anticipation only further weighted his tread. Love also felt Death's presence, but she felt no desire to seek him out, assured that their meeting would come

when it did and unbothered by the time it would take. They began to share spaces, visiting the same places and grieving the same beings laid lifeless across the Earth.

When Love finally laid her eyes on bare-boned Death, it was beneath a sweltering sun. The grass here did not sway across Love's feet; the sward did not billow in a teasing tickle between her toes. Love felt the hot desert wind burn against her skin. The air was nothing more than a blinding swarm of yellow - a sea of roiling red that assaulted her welting skin and an incessant buzzing that drowned out her heartbeat. Death stood afar. His long, dark hair thrashed over his eyes in ruffled tufts. From beneath, Love could scarcely make out his thin lips and furrowed brow; atop his head, vain antlers of grizzled bark reached tall for the sky in sharp greed. As they looked at each other across the plague, Death's shoulders tensed. Love smiled, her face inert, and offered a brief drop of her chin. Then, she turned away.

They would meet for the second time a century later across a frozen desert. Neither knew how they had found themselves there, only that they followed each step with the next until they arrived where they were sure to be going. They were further apart this time, Love barely able to make out Death's bottomless stare - between them, a brute of dirty white fur staggered, its large paws dragging across the ice in slow, dreadful steps. The fur rolled across its side, growing and receding to reveal its starved frame, and the wind whistled a reticent threat. The ground trembled beneath Love's bare feet as an ice shelf to their right shuddered and broke apart from the headland, crashing into the restless ocean. The sound joined the haunted flurry surrounding them with easy acceptance, whispering a single truth: the motherland was dying.

The beast collapsed, and Love's heart shattered. Her accusing stare, woven with disgust and loathing, met with Death. Fire spread beneath her skin, sparks lighting in sharp bundles, and Love's fingers chased them across her body with distress. The pain ate away at the edges of her vision. She followed the blaze in vain as it stretched and devoured her, the pads of her fingers eventually replaced by the pressing of nails, helplessly clawing to relieve her impending implosion. The heat from the fire, from the rage, distracted her from the slow, warm dripping of blood as it trailed down her body, heavier with each moment. Chunks of flesh peeled away, down from her shoulders and across her bare ribs; her right nipple hung limp beneath her ruined breast. The plump of her cheeks had been carved out, fallen lifeless down her face, swinging gently side to side against her blistered lips. The ripping of flesh shattered the silence between them as two wings of carmine plume unfurled in bloody birth from between her shoulder blades. As the last of her brittle nails fell to the stained ice beneath her, Love raised herself in an embrace to the sky and screeched at the clear blue. The horror that stood before Death was a skinned and bloodied body. A pile of tissue and marred flesh squirmed at Love's feet, and the thing of spoiled pulp moaned with its mother as her agony shook the Earth. From Love had born Hate.

As Death watched the beautiful stranger on fire, pawing at the remnants of herself, he felt pain for the first time. Love's body curdled as if the weight of gravity, of her distress, was too much. Her wings stretched outwards, lifting her from the ground with one firm stroke, and as she always did, Love vanished. Hate was left behind. Death shook his head as he watched her go. If

Love and Death had possessed a common tongue, perhaps he would have shouted at her that this was not his doing. That Death had been cheated. A new world had evolved, which could both evade and beckon him, disrupting the balance he was charged with keeping. Death had not yet failed, but he knew that he would in the end.

For years, Death stood on the cursed icy tundra, staring blankly as the red stain faded and resurfaced with every season. As time passed, Death felt disgust creeping beneath his skin, a heavy layer he knew he could not discard; unlike Love, Death had nothing to shed, only broad shoulders to carry burden, guilt, and remorse. As the disgust grew, so did Hate. Abandoned by his mother, Hate hung with Death's upper thigh clenched between his fractured maw in stubborn cruelty, where he nursed from Death's anguish. As Hate grew, he whispered loathing comfort to Death and fed from the spoiled empathy. After a long while, the paled pink having ceased its return entirely, Death turned to leave the killing ground, and Hate followed. Love's abandonment left Hate hungry for recognition and praise, neither of which Death offered, yet Hate tried again and again. Death would come to see him in a favourable light, he was sure, if he tried just a little harder. Plundering behind Death, Hate would cause havoc, but Death never turned back; he said nothing, disgusted and resentful of the thing which had shed from Love like rotten slop.

Where she had gone, Death did not know, nor did he search for her. He was too busy and broken, shattered in pieces, spread across the Earth and sowed for an eternal harvest. Death wandered streets and sat on airplanes. He stood in empty presidential doorways and, in the most horrible of times, at the bottom of defiled stairways. Darkness, which Death once knew to exist in its own right, neither birthed nor banished, oozed from lustful eyes and gaping chests. He saw horrors that made Hate giggle and dance, fervent, by his side, and for five decades, Death cried.

He would not find Love again until the end of the world.

The pier was quiet, the boards beneath Death grey with decay and life long-lived. The ocean waves pulled and crashed beneath Death as he stood on the edge of the dock, his toes hanging over the edge, the splintering wood spiteful against the balls of his feet. Ahead, flocks of birds approached, appearing as hundreds of speckled dots rising from the ocean on the distant horizon. The horde would climb the sky in taunting leisure as the day went on, swollen with a sinister secret; these were not birds. Death knew this assuredly, yet he could not tell if the damp salt which coated his face was from the gentle ocean spray or if he had already begun to grieve the end that he had long foreseen. On this final day, Death was not afraid of the baring daylight. His bones clacked in despondency.

Calamity brought Love and Death together as it always had. Death looked to his left, pulling his eyes away from the horizon with great difficulty, perhaps hoping that the longer he stared, the slower the horde would approach. Far in the distance, Love stood among piles of rubble overlooking the sea. He watched her for a long moment from the faraway pier; his temptation to approach who was once a stranger raged against the idea that she would only flee his presence once again. But their reunion was sure, as most things in life are.

Death approached Love the way one might approach a strange child: tenderly and cautiously. Pebbles clattered around him, the ground littered with discarded feathers and plumes, but Love did not turn to face him; like Death, Love hoped she could delay the inevitable. He paused behind her, so close that his knees nearly brushed her protruding spine; mangled wings lay limp and broken against Love's deformed back. She sat on the rough of a boulder, her arms lifeless by her sides. The salt from the ocean spray burned against Death's skin from under the glowering Sun; the crashing of the waves seemed to fill his skull, a violent tempest of evil thoughts and embarrassments. What comfort could she take from him? He was a monster who had ravaged the world and left nothing in his wake. He could no longer differentiate himself from the aspects of him which had devoured the world. To Death, death and merciless violence were the same, and both were equally damned. With closed eyes, Death waited for the hammering in his head to ease and for the methodical pounding of the waves to return. Once it did, he breathed in the air and thought of the last time he had seen Love; he knew now that she would not look the same. His ribs collapsed as he lowered himself to her right, unsure and afraid.

Her skin had healed but was now pallid and dull; her velvet hide had disintegrated into a grit of sand and rock. Her cheeks were caved in, and her eyes sunken so deep that they had bruised the skin beneath them, bleeding down to the corners of her mouth. Death wished only to kiss the lilac from her face, tender against the pale of her lips. Her eyes were bitter and dejected, and Death saw nothing in them that he recognized. What had once been the plump breast from which Love had fed the Earth now drooped thin and unused against her decaying figure. With trembling fingers, Death touched the inside of Love's thigh, near her bruised and battered knee, and trailed them along the length of her.

Love looked at him. Tears of glass fell from her eyes and trickled down her chin. Finally, Love coughed up a long and empty sob. Her face, twisted and scarred, buried itself in the crook of Death's neck. With his arms wrapped tightly around her, they sat in agony and watched as the jets accosted the shore. They watched as the world ended, the red of the sky a bloody expiration. Behind them, Hate gurgled. His small chortle grew into boisterous laughter, and Death closed his eyes, feeling the throb of his heartbeat in his tightly pressed lips. There was no humour in this for Death, but Hate was enthralled; he welcomed suffering with open arms and an unhinged jaw. The sound of his laughter sloped through the air like a slow-rolling brook of muck and debris. Sputtering, it did not cease until the world was alight in brutal flame and the screams of humankind, who did not deserve the beautiful Love and who obsessed with tired Death. The pair held each other, and Death was comforted knowing that, while the flames enveloped them with hungry regret, he might finally hold Love with penitent confession.

Love looked at Death with a pleading stare. Why, those eyes questioned. Death paused.

I don't know.